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Lucia A Keegan 11/08/2006 02:45:54 PM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007118

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/30/2016  
TAGS: [FR](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: ISRAELI DIPLOMAT THINKS WORST IS OVER ON  
OVERFLIGHT SPAT WITH FRANCE

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: The Israeli PolCouns told us 10/26 that "the worst is over" in terms of the public spat between France and Israel regarding overflights of Lebanon. The Israeli MFA has advised the Israeli Air Force to "cool it," and the French have assured the GoI that UNIFIL's commander will soon be reassigned. Aphek assessed that the French would secretly welcome periodic overflights of Lebanon, and she noted that her embassy enjoys excellent access to new French MFA Political Director Gerard Araud. She interpreted Chirac's appointment of Jean-Pierre Jouyet (a close advisor to leading Socialist Party presidential candidate Segolene Royal) to coordinate the Paris-3 conference on Lebanon as evidence of Chirac's determination to ensure his Lebanon/Syria policy survives his presidency. End summary.

Overflight Crisis Over?  
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¶2. (S) Israeli Embassy Political Counselor Ella Aphek told us October 26 that she believes "the worst is over" in terms of recent tensions among Israel, UNIFIL and France with respect to Israeli overflights of Lebanon. Aphek described the Israeli Air Force (IAF) overflights of Beirut on October 23 as a deliberately muscular response to comments made by French Defense Minister Michele Alliot-Marie (MAM) during an October 20 press conference at the UN. Alliot-Marie reportedly said that Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace were dangerous "because they may be perceived as hostile by forces of the coalition that could be brought to retaliate in cases of self defense." Although French President Jacques Chirac voiced a simultaneous call for an end to the Israeli overflights, the Israelis found MAM's comments more irksome because "Alliot-Marie implied a threat, and Chirac did not,"

explained Aphek. She dismissed the comments of UNIFIL's commander, (French) Major General Alain Pellegrini, regarding a possible expansion of UNIFIL's rules of engagement to prevent overflights, by saying that France had privately assured Israel that Pellegrini would soon be reassigned.

¶3. (S) Aphek said that in response to the October 23 overflights, the Elysee "clearly leaked" the story (reported by Le Figaro and Le Monde the following day) that France was considering scaling back its commitment to UNIFIL. However, she did not seem greatly troubled by that report, and noted that Chirac had previously warned Israeli Ambassador Shek that France would reassess its deployment of peacekeepers after three or four months. Moreover, Aphek confided that the Israeli MFA had advised the IAF to "cool it" on overflights for the time being. In addition, she noted a positive meeting between Israeli Ambassador Shek and Jean Felix-Pagagnon, the MFA's Director for the Middle East and North Africa, on October 25 during which Felix-Pagagnon stressed that the Quai was consulting closely with French intelligence services on ways to share more intelligence with Israel to obviate the need for overflights. Aphek noted that in turn, Israel was considering French suggestions (e.g., no low-altitude overflights of Beirut, use of drones rather than F-16s, and greater reliance on satellite imagery). The irony, said Aphek, was that the French did not really wish to see a complete end to the overflights because they shared Israel's interest in detecting any arms shipments to Hizballah. The message the GoI had taken away from its discussions with French officials was that an overflight "from time to time" would not be such a bad thing. (Comment: We take this analysis with half a grain of salt. End comment.)

¶4. (C) On a related note, Aphek observed that Israel had an excellent working relationship with the Quai's new Political Director (and former Ambassador to Israel) Gerard Araud. She noted that Araud had proven exceptionally effective during his tenure in Israel, and that his positive approach had already carried over to his new assignment. "We had good relations with Ambassador de Laboulaye (Araud's predecessor), but it was never anything like this," said Aphek, who noted that Araud and Israeli Ambassador Shek have swapped cell phone numbers and are in almost daily contact. "We have a hot line," she said with contentment.

#### Peace Process

¶5. (C) Turning to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Aphek stressed that the return of kidnapped Cpl. Gilad Shalit was the key to progress. She predicted that PM Olmert would meet with PA President Abbas once Shalit was released, in part to reassure his electorate, and Israel's neighbors, that his government would remain a partner for peace notwithstanding the inclusion of MK Avigdor Lieberman in the cabinet. She assessed that Hamas leader Khalid Mishal remained a key impediment to Shalit's release, as did the Asad regime -- which she characterized as "counting the days" until the end of President Chirac's mandate in the hope that France would then revise its Syria policy. However, she said that Chirac's appointment of former Paris Club president Jean-Pierre Jouyet -- a close advisor of leading Socialist Party presidential contender Segolene Royal -- as coordinator of the upcoming Paris-3 conference on Lebanon was a sign Chirac was bent on ensuring his Lebanon/Syria policy would survive his presidency. (Note: During a visit to Lebanon late last week, Socialist Party chief Francois Hollande assured local journalists that a Socialist president would maintain Chirac's commitment to Lebanon but would rely less on personal relationships, noting that the Socialist party has stronger historical ties to the Jumblatts than to the Hariris. End note.) With respect to the Quartet, Aphek assessed that French officials continue to pay lip service to the Roadmap but are, in fact, eager to escape the Roadmap's sequencing constraints.

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